

THE MEANING OF LIFE

By Ven. Narada Mahathera

Who is Man? How did Man originate? Where is Man going? What is the aim of Life? These are some important questions, the answers to which affect all humanity.

Let us proceed with what is self-evident and perceptible to all. Who is Man?

Man possesses a body which is seen either by our senses or by means of apparatus. This material body consists of forces and qualities which are in a state of constant flux.

Scientists find it difficult to define what matter is. Certain philosophers define “matter as that in which proceed the changes called motion and motion as those changes which proceed in matter?”

The Pali term for matter is *Rupa*. It is explained as that which changes or disintegrates. That which

manifests itself is also another explanation.

According to Buddhism there are four fundamental material elements. They are *Pathavi*, *Apo*, *Tejo* and *Vayo*.

Pathavi means the element of extension, the substratum of matter. Without it objects cannot occupy space. The qualities of hardness and softness which are purely relatives are two conditions of this element. This element of extension is present in earth, water, fire and air. For instance, water above is supported by water below. It is this element of extension in conjunction with the element of motion (*Vayo*) that produces the upward pressure.

Apo is the element of cohesion. Unlike *Pathavi* it is intangible. It is this element which enables the scattered atoms of matter to cohere and thus gives us the idea of body.

Tejo is the element of heat. Cold is also a form of *Tejo*. Both heat and cold are included in *Tejo* because they possess the power of maturing bodies, or, in other words, they are the vitalizing energy. Preservation and decay are due to this element.

Vayo is the element of motion. Movements are caused by this element. Motion is regarded as the force or the generator of heat. Both motion and heat in the material realm correspond respectively to consciousness and Kamma in the mental.

These four powerful forces are inseparable and interrelated, but one element may preponderate over another, as for instance, the element of extension

preponderates earth, cohesion in water, heat in fire and motion in air.

Thus, matter consists of forces and qualities which constantly change, not remaining the same even for two consecutive moments. According to Buddhism matter endures only for 17 thought-moments while scientists tell us that matter endures only for 10/27th of a second.

At the moment of birth, according to biology, man inherits from his parents an infinitesimally minute cell a 30 millionth part of an inch across. "In the course of nine months this speck grows to a living bulk 15,000 million times greater than it was at outset." This tiny chemico-physical cell is the physical foundation of man.

According to Buddhism, sex is also determined at the moment of conception.

Combined with matter there is another important factor in this complex machinery of man. It is the mind. As such it pleases some learned writers to say that man is not Mind plus Body, but is a Mind-Body. Scientists declare that life emerges from matter and mind from life. But they do not give us a satisfactory explanation with regard to the development of the mind.

Unlike the material body, immaterial mind is invisible, but it could be sensed directly. An old poetry runs as follows:

"What is mind? No matter".

"What is matter? Never mind".

We are aware of our thoughts and feelings and so forth by direct sensation, and we infer their existence in others by analogy.

There are several Pali terms for mind. *Mana*, *Citta*, *Vinnana* are the most note-worthy of them. Compare the Pali root *man* (pronunciation: rhymes with pun), to think, with the English word man and the Pali word *Manussa* which means he who has a developed consciousness.

In Buddhism no distinction is made between mind and consciousness. Both are used as synonymous terms. Mind may be defined as simply the awareness of an object since there is no agent or a soul that directs all activities. It consists of fleeting mental states which constantly arise and perish with lightning rapidity "With birth for its source and death for its mouth it persistently flows on like a river receiving from the tributary streams of sense constant accretions to its flood." Each momentary consciousness of this everchanging lifestream, on passing away, transmits its whole energy, all the indelibly recorded impressions, to its successor. Every fresh consciousness therefore consists of the potentialities of its predecessors and something more. As all impressions are indelibly recorded in this ever-changing palimpsest-like mind, and as all potentialities are transmitted from life to life, irrespective of temporary physical disintegrations, reminiscence of past births or past incidents becomes a possibility. If memory depends solely on brain cells, it becomes an impossibility.

Like electricity, mind is both a constructive and

destructive powerful force. It is like a double-edged weapon that can equally be used either for good or evil. One single thought that arises in this invisible mind can even save or destroy the world. One such thought can either populate or depopulate a whole country. It is mind that creates one's hell.

Ouspensky writes:—

“Concerning the latent energy contained in the phenomena of consciousness, i.e. in thoughts, feelings, desires, we discover that its potentiality is even more immeasurable, more boundless. From personal experience, from observation, from history, we know that ideas, feelings, desires, manifesting themselves, can liberate enormous quantities of energy, and create infinite series of phenomena. An idea can act for centuries and milleniums and only grows and deepens, evoking ever new series of phenomena, liberating ever-fresh energy. We know that thoughts continue to live and act when even the very name of man who created them has been converted into a myth, like the names of the founders of mortal poetical works of antiquity – heroes, leaders and prophets. Their words are repeated on innumerable lips, their ideas are studied and commented upon.”

“Undoubtedly each thought of a poet contains enormous potential force, like the power confined in a piece of coal or in a living cell, but infinitely more subtle, imponderable and potent.”

Observe, for instance, the potential force that lies in the following significant words of the Buddha:—

*Mano-pubbangama dhamma –
mano settha manomaya.*

Mind fore-runs deeds; mind is chief,
and mind-made are they.

Mind or consciousness, according to Buddhism, arises at the very moment of conception, together with matter. Consciousness is therefore present in the foetus. This initial consciousness, technically known as rebirth consciousness or relinking consciousness (*Patisandhi vinnana*), is conditioned by past kamma of the person concerned. The subtle mental, intellectual, and moral differences that exist amongst mankind are due to this Kamma conditioned consciousness, the second factor of man.

To complete the trio that constitutes man there is a third factor, the phenomenon of life that vitalizes both mind and matter. Due to the presence of life, reproduction becomes possible. Life manifests itself both in physical and mental phenomena. In Pali the two forms of life are termed *Nama jivitindriya* and *Rupa jivitindriya* — psychic and physical life.

Matter, mind, and life are therefore the three distinct factors that constitute man. With their combination a powerful force known as man with inconceivable possibilities comes into being. He becomes his own creator and destroyer. In him are found a rubbish-heap of evil and a store-house of virtue. In him are found the

worm, the brute, the man, the superman, the deva, the Brahma. Both criminal tendencies and saintly characteristics are dormant in him. He may either be a blessing or a curse to himself and others. In fact man is a world by himself.

How did man originate? That is our second question.

Either there must be a beginning for man or there cannot be a beginning. Those who belong to the first school postulate a first cause, whether as a cosmic force or as an Almighty Being. Those who belong to the second school denies a first cause for, in common experience, the cause ever becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In a circle of cause and effect a first cause is inconceivable.

According to the former, life has had a beginning; while according to the latter it is beginningless. In the opinion of some the conception of a first cause is as ridiculous as a round triangle.

According to the scientific standpoint, man is the direct product of the sperm of ovum cells provided by his parents. Scientists while asserting "*Omne vivum ex vivo*" — all life from life, maintain that mind and life evolved from the lifeless.

Now, from the scientific standpoint, man is absolutely parent-born. As such life precedes life. With regard to the origin of the protoplasm of life, or 'colloid' (whichever we please to call it), scientists plead ignorance.

According to Buddhism man is born from the matrix of action (*kammayoni*). Parents merely provide man with a material layer. As such being precedes being. At the moment of conception, it is *Kamma* that conditions the initial consciousness that vitalizes the foetus. It is this invisible Kammic energy generated from the past birth that produces mental phenomena and the phenomena of life in an already extant physical phenomenon, to complete the trio that constitutes man.

Dealing with the conception of beings, the Buddha states:-

“Where three are found in combination, there a germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, but it is not the mother’s period, and the ‘being-to-be-born’ (*gandhabba*) is not present, then no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother’s period, but the ‘being-to-be-born’ is not present, then again no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother’s period, and the being-to-be-born is also present, then, by the combination of these three, the germ of life is there planted.

Here *Gandhabba* (= *gantabba*) refers to a suitable being ready to be born in a particular womb. This term is used only in this particular connection, and must not be mistaken for a permanent soul.

For a being to be born here, a being must die somewhere. The birth of a being corresponds to the death of a being in a past life; just as, in conventional terms,

the rising of the sun in one place means the setting of the sun in another place.

The Buddha states — “a first beginning of beings who, obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, wander and fare on, is not to be perceived.”

This life-stream flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with the muddy waters of ignorance and craving. When these two are completely cut off, then only does the life-stream cease to flow; rebirth ends as in the case of Buddhas and Arahants. An ultimate beginning of this life-stream cannot be determined, as a stage cannot be perceived when this life-force was not fraught with ignorance and craving.

The Buddha has here referred merely to the beginning of the life-stream of living beings. It is left to scientists to speculate on the origin and the evolution of the universe.

At the outset it should be stated that the Buddha does not attempt to solve all the ethical and philosophical problems that perplexed mankind. Nor does He deal with speculations and theories that tend neither to edification nor to enlightenment. Nor does He demand blind faith from His adherents on a First Cause. He is chiefly concerned with one practical and specific problem, that of suffering and its destruction; all side issues are completely ignored.

On one occasion a Bhikkhu named Malunkya-putta, not contented to lead the Holy Life, and achieve his Emancipation by degrees, approached the Buddha and

impatiently demanded an immediate solution of some speculative problems with the threat of discarding the robes, if no satisfactory answer is given.

“Lord”, he said, “these theories have not been elucidated, have been set aside and rejected by the Blessed One whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite. If the Blessed One will elucidate these questions to me, then I will lead the Holy life under Him. If He will not, then I will abandon the precepts and return to the lay life.

“If the Blessed One knows that the world is eternal, let the Blessed One elucidate to me that the world is eternal; if the Blessed One knows that the world is not eternal, let the Blessed One elucidate that the world is not eternal — in that case, certainly, for one who does not know and lacks the insight, the only upright thing is to say: I do not know, I have not the insight.”

Calmly the Buddha questioned the erring Bhikkhu whether his adoption of the Holy Life was in any way conditional upon the solutions of such problems.

“Nay, Lord,” the Bhikkhu replied.

The Buddha then admonished him not to waste time and energy over idle speculations detrimental to his moral progress, and said: “Whoever, *Malunkya*, should say, ‘I will not lead the Holy Life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One elucidates these questions to me’ that person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated by the Accomplished One.

It is as if a person were pierced by an arrow thickly

smearred with poison, and his friends and relatives were to procure a surgeon, and then he were to say, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I know the details of the person, by whom I was wounded, nature of the arrow with which I was pierced, etc." That person would die before this would ever be known by him.

"In exactly the same way whoever should say, 'I will not lead the Holy Life under the Blessed One until He elucidates to me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite —' That person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated by the Accomplished One.

"If it be the belief that the world is eternal, will there be the observance of the Holy Life? In such a case — No! If it be the belief that the world is not eternal, will there be the observance of the Holy Life? In that case also — No! But, whether the belief be that the world is eternal or is not eternal, there is birth, there is old age, there is death, the extinction of which in this life itself I make known.

"Malunkyaputta, I have not revealed whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite. Why have I not revealed these? Because these are not profitable, do not concern the basis of holiness, are not conducive to aversion, to passionlessness, to cessation, to tranquility, to intuitive wisdom, to enlightenment or to Nibbana. Therefore I have not revealed these."

Where is Man going? That is our third question.

According to ancient materialism which, in Pali and Sanskrit, is known as *Lokayata*, man is annihilated after death, leaving behind him any force generated by him. "Man is composed of four elements. When man dies, the earthly element returns and relapses into the earth: the watery element returns into the water; the fiery element returns into the fire; the airy element returns into the air; the senses pass into space. Wise men and fools alike, when the body dissolves, are cut off, perish, do not exist any longer. There is no other world. Death is the end of all. This present world alone is real. The so-called eternal heaven and hell are the inventions of imposters."

Materialists believe only in what is cognizable by the senses. As such, matter alone is real. The ultimate principles are the four elements earth, water, fire and air. The self-conscious life mysteriously springs forth from them, just as the genie makes its appearance when Aladdin rubs his lamp. The brain secretes thought just as liver secretes bile.

In the view of materialists the belief in the other world, as Sri Radhakrishnan states, "is a sign of mendaciousness, femininity, weakness, cowardice and dishonesty".

According to one religion there is no past for man. The present is only a preparation for two eternities of heaven and hell. Whether they are viewed as places or states, man has for his future endless suffering in hell. Man is therefore not annihilated after death, but his

essence goes to eternity.

“Whoever,” as Schopenhauer says, regards himself as having become out of nothing must also think that he will again become nothing; for that an eternity has passed before he was, and then a second eternity had begun, through which he will never cease to be, is a monstrous thought.”

One School of Thought who believe in a past and present do not state that man is annihilated after death. Nor do they say that man is eternalized after death. They believe in an endless series of past and future births. In their opinion the life-stream of man flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is propelled by the force of Kamma, one's actions. In due course the essence of man may be reabsorbed in the Ultimate Reality (*Paramatma*) from which his soul emanated.

Buddhism believes in the present. With the present as the basis it argues the past and future. Just as an electric light is the outward manifestation of invisible electric energy even so man is merely the outward manifestation of an invisible energy known as Kamma. The bulb may break, and the light may be extinguished, but the current remains and the light may be reproduced in another bulb. In the same way the Kammic force remains undisturbed by the disintegration of the physical body, and the passing away of the present consciousness leads to the arising of a fresh one in another birth. Here the electric current is like the Kammic force, and the bulb may be compared to the egg-cell provided by the

parents.

Past Kamma conditions the present birth; and present Kamma in combination with past Kamma, conditions the future. The present is the offspring of the past, and becomes in turn the parent of the future.

Rebirth, which Buddhists do not regard as a mere theory but as a fact verifiable by evidence, forms a fundamental tenet of Buddhism, though its goal *Nibbana* is attainable in this life itself. The *Bodhisatta* ideal and the correlative doctrine of freedom to attain utter perfection are based on this doctrine of rebirth.

Documents record that this belief in rebirth, viewed as transmigration or reincarnation, was accepted by philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato, poets like Shelley, Tennyson, and Wordsworth, and many ordinary people in the East as well as in the West.

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the theory of transmigration and reincarnation of other systems, because Buddhism denies the existence of a transmigrating permanent soul, created by God, or emanating from a Paramatma (Divine Essence).

The actuality of the present needs no proof as it is self-evident. That of the past is based on memory and report, and that of the future on fore-thought and inference.

One might argue that life must have had a beginning in the infinite past and that beginning or the First Cause is the Creator.

In that case there is no reason why the same demand may not be made of this postulated Creator.

“Moreover, if birth is the absolute beginning, then death must be the absolute end; and the assumption that man is made out of nothing, leads necessarily to the assumption that death is his absolute end.”

Death is therefore not the complete annihilation of man, for though that particular life span is ended, the force which hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

After death the life-flux of man continues *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with the waters of ignorance and craving. In conventional terms man need not necessarily be born as man because humans are not the only living beings. Moreover, earth, an almost insignificant speck in the universe, is not the only place in which he will seek rebirth. He may be born in other habitable planes as well.

If man wishes to put an end to this repeated series of births, he can do so as the Buddha and Arahants have done by realizing Nibbana, the complete cessation of all forms of craving.

Where does man go? He can go wherever he wills or likes if he is fit for it. If, with no particular wish, he leaves his path to be prepared by the course of events, he will go to the place or state he fully deserves in accordance with his Kamma.

According to the Theological principles, argues Spencer Lewis, “man is created arbitrarily and without his desire, and at the moment of creation is either blessed

or unfortunate, noble or depraved, from the first step in the process of his physical creation to the moment of his last breath, regardless of his individual desires, hopes, ambitions, struggles or devoted prayers. Such is theological fatalism.

“The doctrine that all men are sinners and have the essential sin of Adam is a challenge to justice, mercy, love and omnipotent fairness.”

Huxley says — “If we are to assume that anybody has designedly set this wonderful universe going, it is perfectly clear to me that he is no more entirely benevolent and just, in any intelligible sense of the words, than that he is malevolent and unjust.”

According to Einstein: “If this being (God) is omnipotent, then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also his work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thought before such an Almighty Being?”

“In giving out punishments and rewards, He would to a certain extent be passing judgement on himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to him?”

According to Charles Bradlaugh — “The existence of evil is a terrible stumbling block to the Theist. Pain, misery, crime, poverty confront the advocate of eternal goodness, and challenge with unanswerable potency, his declaration of Deity as all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful.”

Commenting on human suffering and God, Prof. J.B.S. Haldane writes:

“Either suffering is needed to perfect human character, or God is not Almighty. The former theory is disproved by the fact that some people who have suffered very little but have been fortunate in their ancestry and education have very fine characters. The objection to the second is that it is only in connection with the universe as a whole that there is any intellectual gap to be filled by the postulation of a deity. And a creator could presumably create whatever he or it wanted.”

In “Despair”, a poem of his old age, Lord Tennyson thus boldly attacks God, who, as recorded in Isaiah, says “I make peace and create evil.”

“What! I should call on that infinite Love that has served us so well? Infinite cruelty, rather than made everlasting hell.”

Dogmatic writers of old authoritatively declared that God created man after his own image. Some modern thinkers state, on the contrary, that man created God after his own image. With the growth of civilization man’s conception of God grows more and more refined. There is at present a tendency to substitute this personal God by an impersonal God.

Voltaire states that God is the noblest creation of

man. It is however impossible to conceive of such an omnipotent, omnipresent being an epitome of everything that is good — either in or outside the universe.

What is the aim of Life? That is our last question.

This is rather a controversial question. What is the materialistic point of view?

Scientists answer:-

*“Has life purpose? What, or where, or when?
Out of space came universe, came Sun,
Came Earth, came Life, came Man,
and more must come
But as to Purpose: whose or whence? Why, None.”*

As materialists confine themselves purely to sense-data and the present material welfare, ignoring all spiritual values, they hold a view diametrically opposite to that of moralists. In their opinion there is no purpose — hence there cannot be a purpose.

“Who colours wonderfully the peacocks, or who makes the cuckoos coo so well?” This is one of the chief arguments of the materialists to attribute everything to the natural order of things.

“Eat, drink, and be merry, for death comes to all, closing our lives,” appears to be the ethical ideal of their system. In their opinion, as Sri Radhakrishnan writes — “Virtue is a delusion and enjoyment is the only reality. Death is the end of life. Religion is a foolish aberration, a mental disease. There was a distrust of everything good,

high, pure, and compassionate. The theory stands for sensualism and selfishness and the gross affirmation of the loud will. There is no need to control passion and instinct since they are nature's legacy to men."

Sarvadarsana Sangraha says:-

"While life is yours, live joyously.
None can escape Death's searching eye;
When once this frame of ours they burn,
How shall it e'er again return?"

"While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt."

Now let us turn to science to get a solution to the question "Why?"

It should be noted that "science is a study of things, a study of what is and that religion is a study of ideas, a study of what should be."

Sir J. Arthur Thompson maintains that science is incomplete because it cannot answer the question "Why"

Dealing with Cosmic Purpose, Bertrand Russell states three kinds of views — theistic, pantheistic, and emergent. "The first," he writes, "holds that God created the world and decreed the laws of nature because he foresaw that in time some good would be evolved. In this view purpose exists consciously in the mind of the creator, who remains external to His creation.

"In the pantheistic form, God is not external to the

universe, but is merely the universe considered as a whole. There cannot therefore be an act of creation, but there is a kind of creative force in the universe, which causes it to develop according to a plan which this creative force may be said to have had in mind throughout the process.

“In the ‘emergent’ form, the purpose is more blind. At an earlier stage, nothing in the universe foresees a later stage, but a kind of blind impulsion leads to those changes which bring more developed forms into existence, so that, in some rather obscure sense, the end is implicit in the beginning.”

We offer no comments. These are merely the views of different religionists and great thinkers.

Whether there is a cosmic purpose or not a question arises as to the usefulness of the tapeworm, snakes, mosquitoes and so forth, and for the existence of rabies. How does one account for the problem of evil? Are earthquakes, floods, pestilences, and wars designed?

Expressing his own view about Cosmic Purpose, Russell boldly declares:—

“Why, in any case, this glorification of man? How about lions and tigers? They destroy fewer animals or human lives than we do, and they are much more beautiful than we are. How about ants? They manage the Corporate State much better than any Fascist. Would not a world of nightingales and larks and deer be better than our human world of cruelty and injustice and war? The believers in cosmic purpose make much of our supposed intelligence. But their writings make one doubt it. If I

were granted omnipotence, and millions of years to experiment in, I should not think Man much to boast of as the final result of all my efforts.”

Now, how does Buddhism answer the question “Why?”

Buddhism denies the existence of a Creator. As such from a Buddhist point of view there cannot be a fore-ordained purpose. Nor does Buddhism advocate fatalism, determinism, or pre-destination which controls man’s future independent of his free actions. In such a case freewill becomes an absolute force and life becomes purely mechanistic.

To a large extent man’s actions are more or less mechanistic, being influenced by his own doings, up-bringing, environment and so forth. But to a certain extent man can exercise his freewill. A person, for instance, falling from a cliff will be attracted to the ground just as an inanimate stone would. In this case he cannot use his freewill although he has a mind unlike the stone. If he were to climb a cliff, he could certainly use his freewill and act as he likes. A stone, on the contrary, is not free to do so of its own accord. Man has the power to choose between right and wrong, good and bad. Man can either be hostile or friendly to himself and others. It all depends on his mind and its development.

Although there is no specific purpose in man’s existence, yet man is free to have some purpose in life.

What, therefore, is the meaning of life?

Ouspensky writes: –

“Some say that the meaning of life is in service, in the surrender of self, in self-sacrifice, in the sacrifice of everything, even life itself. Others declare that the meaning of life is in the delight of it, relieved against ‘the expectation of the final horror of death.’ Some say that the meaning of life is in perfection, and the creation of a better future beyond the grave, or in future life for ourselves. Others say that the meaning of life is in the approach to non-existence; still others, that the meaning of life is in the perfection of the race, in the organization of life on earth; while there are those who deny the possibility of even attempting to know its meaning.”

Criticizing all these views the learned writer says:—

“The fault of all these explanations consists in the fact that they all attempt to discover the meaning of life outside of itself, either in the nature of humanity, or in some problematical existence beyond the grave, or again in the evolution of the Ego throughout many successive incarnations — always in something outside of the present life of man. But if instead of speculating about it, men would simply look within themselves, then they would see that in reality the meaning of life is not after all so obscure. It consists in knowledge.”

In the opinion of a Buddhist, the meaning of life is Supreme Enlightenment (*Sambodhi*) i.e. understanding of oneself as one really is. This may be achieved through sublime conduct, mental culture, and penetrative insight; or in other words, through service and perfection.

In service are included boundless loving-kindness, compassion, and absolute selflessness, which prompt man to be of service to others. Perfection embraces absolute purity and absolute wisdom. ■